# Julius Nepos

**(24 June 474 – 28 August 475)**

## BRIEFING

**Julius Nepos** (died 9 May 480), or simply **Nepos**, ruled as Roman emperor of the West from 24 June 474 to 28 August 475. After losing power in Italy, Nepos retreated to his home province of Dalmatia, from which he continued to claim the western imperial title, with recognition from the Eastern Roman Empire, until he was murdered in 480. Though Nepos' successor in Italy, Romulus Augustulus (r. 475–476), is traditionally deemed the last western Roman emperor, Nepos is regarded by some historians as the true last emperor of the west, being the last widely recognised holder of the position.

A native of Dalmatia, Nepos began his career as the semi-autonomous governor of the province, succeeding his uncle Marcellinus, a prominent general, as *magister militum* ('master of troops') of Dalmatia. After the death of the western emperor Anthemius (r. 467–472), who had been appointed by the eastern emperor Leo I (r. 457–474), as well as Anthemius' successor Olybrius (r. 472), Leo sought to assert his authority in the west, granting Nepos command of an army in December 473 to attack Italy and depose Glycerius (r. 473–474), who had been proclaimed emperor by the Burgundian general Gundobad. Nepos left for Italy in the spring of 474, backed by Leo's successor Zeno, and landed with his army at Portus, near Rome. Nepos swiftly deposed Glycerius and was crowned western emperor in Rome on 24 June 474. He was the last emperor to be crowned in the city until Charlemagne in the ninth century. Whether the original intention of the invasion was to install Nepos as western emperor is unclear, but in any event, he was quickly recognised as the legitimate western emperor by Zeno.

Nepos worked to restore the prestige and authority of the Western Empire, though mostly unsuccessfully. He may have repelled a Visigothic attack on Italy and managed to once more reduce the Burgundians into *foederati*. Nepos focused most of his attention on reasserting imperial control and authority in Gaul, but the Western Empire could no longer project enough strength to halt Visigothic conquests in the region. The failure to defeat the Visigoths in Gaul, and Zeno's brief overthrow in Constantinople by the usurper Basiliscus, weakened Nepos' already shaky position in Italy. In 475, Nepos' newly appointed *magister militum* Orestes revolted and marched on Ravenna, capital of the Western Empire. Unable to deal with Orestes' forces, Nepos fled back to Dalmatia and two months later, Orestes proclaimed his young son Romulus Augustulus as emperor.

Although no longer in control of Italy, Nepos never renounced his claim to the Western Empire and continued to be recognised as the legitimate western emperor by the Eastern Empire. In 476, the barbarian general Odoacer deposed Romulus Augustulus and became the first king of Italy. Nepos repeatedly petitioned Zeno, who by then had defeated Basiliscus, for help in regaining control of Italy, though all he achieved was nominal recognition by Odoacer, who minted coins in Nepos' name but otherwise mostly ignored him. In 480, Nepos was murdered by two of his generals, Ovida and Viator, perhaps in Diocletian's Palace, possibly while planning an expedition of his own to recover Italy.

## ORIGINS

Julius Nepos was the son of Nepotianus, Master of Soldiers in the west ca.458-461, and the nephew of the patrician Marcellinus, Master of Soldiers in Dalmatia ca. 461-468. He married a neptis, probably a niece, of the emperor **Leo** (457-474). He would have inherited Marcellinus' support in Dalmatia, where, as Master of Soldiers himself, he received an extant law of **Leo** dated 1 June 473 (Codex Justinianus 6.61.5) dealing with marital property rights. By 474 he also had received the title of patrician.

Nepos' uncle Marcellinus was a prominent late Roman general, having fought the Vandals in several campaigns and playing a notable role in momentarily fending off Vandal attempts at controlling Sardinia. In 461, after the murder of Emperor Majorian by Ricimer, Marcellinus appears to have planned to invade Italy to depose Ricimer's puppet emperor Libius Severus (r. 461–465), but he was dissuaded from this course of action by the eastern emperor Leo I. Nepos married a Roman noblewoman whose name is not recorded, but who was related to the eastern empress Verina, possibly a niece of Leo I.

By the time of his death, Marcellinus had been a semi-autonomous governor in Dalmatia, and after his death, Nepos inherited this position. Nepos is first attested on 1 June 473, when he is described as *magister militum Dalmatiae*, although it is possible that he had held that rank ever since Marcellinus' death. Nepos might have held this position until he became emperor in 474, by which point he had also become a patrician.

## ACCESION

After the death of **Anthemius** (467-472), not to mention that of **Olybrius** (472), the aging eastern emperor **Leo** would have viewed himself once again as sole emperor, with the right to select a new emperor in the west. Initially, he seems not to have made any effort to name a western colleague, perhaps being forestalled by the example of what had happened to **Anthemius** and by not having a suitable candidate of his own. In 473, however, he decided to take action after the Patrician Gundobad raised **Glycerius**, the Count of the Domestics, to the purple in March. John of Antioch noted, "When Leo, the emperor of the east, learned of the election of Glycerius, he appointed Nepos as general of an expedition against him" (*fr.*209.2: Gordon trans., p.122). **Leo** must have dithered for some time before doing so, because by the time the decision was made the approaching winter had closed the seas and it was too late for Nepos to take any action. For **Leo**, Nepos was a good choice: as in the case of the nomination of **Anthemius**, by this means he not only could rid himself of a possible rival in the east, but also reassert his own authority over the west.

At the very beginning of spring, 474, Nepos crossed to Italy, arriving at the the port of Rome. The chronicler Marcellinus stated,

"The Caesar Glycerius, who held the imperial power at Rome, was deposed from power at the port of the city of Rome [i.e. Ostia] by Nepos, son of the sister of the former patrician Marcellinus. From Caesar he was ordained a bishop, and he died... Nepos, who had expelled Glycerius from the emperorship, was acclaimed as emperor at Rome ("*Glycerius Caesar Romae imperium tenens a Nepote Marcellini quondam patricii sororis filio imperio expulsus in Portu urbis Romae ex Caesare episcopus ordinatus est et obiit... Nepos, qui Glycerium regno populerat, Romae elevatus est imperator*": Chron. *s.a.*474-475.

John of Antioch said of Nepos,

"He took Rome, captured Glycerius without a fight and, having stripped him of royalty, appointed him bishop of Salona. He had enjoyed his rule for eight months. Nepos was immediately appointed emperor and ruled Rome" (*fr.*209.2: Gordon trans., pp.122-123)

The Anonymus valesianus provides a similar report: "Therefore, at the order of the emperor Zeno, the patrician Nepos, arriving from Constantinople at the port of the city of Rome, deposed Glycerius from the emperorship and made him bishop, and Nepos was made emperor at Rome" ("*igitur imperante Zenone Augusto Constantinopoli superveniens Nepos patricius ad Portum urbis Romae deposuit de imperio Glycerium et factus est episcopus et Nepos factus imperator Romae*": 7.36 *s.a.*474). And the Fasti vindobonenses priores not only confirm the location of the deposition, but also provide a date: 24 June ("h*is consul. de imperio Glicerius in Portu urbis Romae; eo anno levatus est d.n. Iulius Nepos VIII kald. Iulias*": nos.613-614; *cf.* Auctuarii Hauniensis ordo posterior, s.a.474: "*Glycerius de imperio deiectus a Nepote patricio in Portu urbis Romae episcopus ordinatur. Nepos patricius in Portu urbis Romae imperii iura suscipit*"). The Auctuarii Hauniensis ordo posterior, however, dates his accession to 19 June.

The preceding sources indicate that Nepos did not become emperor until after the formal deposition of **Glycerius**. But the mid-sixth-century historian Jordanes, however, not only made it clear that as far as the eastern court was concerned, Nepos was the direct successor of **Anthemius**, but also suggested that the investiture ceremony took place not at Rome but at Ravenna, and before, not after **Glycerius'** deposition:

"After Anthemius had been killed at Rome, Zeno, through his client Domitianus, named as emperor at Ravenna Nepotianus' son Nepos, who had been joined in marriage to his niece. Nepos, having taken legal possession of the empire, deposed Glycerius, who had imposed himself upon the empire in a tyrannical manner, and made him bishop of Salona in Dalmatia ("*occisoque Romae Anthemio Nepotem filium Nepotiani copulata nepte sua in matrimonio apud Ravennam per Domitianum clientem suum Caesarem ordinavit [sc.Zeno]. qui Nepos regno potitus legitimo Glycerium, qui sibi tyrannico more regnum inposuisset, ab imperio expellens in Salona Dalmatia episcopum fecit*": Romana 338-339).

Jordanes here uses the word "Caesar," and it may be that in this case a formal designation was meant. Just as little **Leo II** had first been proclaimed Caesar in 473 and then Augustus in 474, and, indeed, just as **Valentinian III** (425-455) had been named Caesar in 424, while the usurper Johannes (423-425) still ruled in Rome, before being raised to Augustus in 425, Nepos likewise might have been granted the temporizing rank of Caesar at Ravenna prior to the overthrow of **Glycerius** and Nepos' resultant raising to the rank of Augustus at Rome.

## REIGN

Little is known of Nepos' activities, domestic or foreign, during his brief reign. In Italy, Nepos issued gold solidi and tremisses at Rome, Ravenna, and Milan, as well as semisses at Rome. Silver also was struck at Ravenna, and bronze at Milan. A token imperial coinage even continued in Gaul, where a small number of gold solidi were issued at Arles and attest to Nepos' efforts there. In northern Gaul, small silver pieces in Nepos' name were issued, perhaps by the quasi-imperial Roman rulers such as Syagrius of Soissons who maintained themselves there.

In an unusual step for this late period Nepos even issued a few symbolic coins in the names of **Zeno** and **Leo II**, attesting to the close ties between the two courts, even though, as opposed to the case of **Anthemius**, he had no expectations of any concrete assistance from Constantinople.

Nepos' best-known efforts involved Gaul, where he named Ecdicius, the son of the emperor **Avitus** (455-456), as his Patrician and Master of Soldiers. Sidonius Apollinaris, ever the optimist, wrote to his wife Papianilla about the appointment:

"The moment the Quaestor Licinianus, coming from Ravenna, crossed the Alps and set foot on Gallic soil, he sent a message in advance to make it known that he was the bearer of imperial codicils conferring the title of Patrician on Ecdicius... Julius Nepos, true emperor in character no less than prowess, has done nobly in keeping the pledged word of his predecessor Anthemius that the labors of your brother should be recognized; his action is all the more laudable for the promptitude with which he has fulfilled a promise reiterated so often by another. In future the best men in the state will feel able to spend their strength with the utmost ardor for the commonwealth, assured that even should the prince who promised die, the empire itself will be responsible and pay the debt due to their devotion and self-sacrifice..." (Epist. 5.16.1-2: Dalton trans., 2.69).

Other Gauls also seem to have felt a momentary enthusiasm for the new emperor. One of Sidonius' relatives, Apollinaris, fell afoul of the Burgundians as a result; Sidonius wrote to him, "Venomous tongues have been secretly at work, whispering in the ear of the ever-victorious Chilperic, our Master of Soldiers, that your machinations are chiefly responsible for the attempt to wih the town of Vaison for the new emperor" (Epist. 6.6.2: Dalton trans., 2.55). Only through the good offices of the Burgundian queen Caratena was Apollinaris saved.

At the same time, Nepos also embarked on a diplomatic offensive against the Visigoths, to whom he sent two embassies in an attempt to consolidate what remained of imperial holdings in Gaul. It seems that the Goths had occupied much of Provence in 473-474, but a threatened imperial invasion led the Visigothic king Euric to be willing to negotiate. Nepos used as ambassadors not imperial officials but Roman bishops. In the spring of 475 he sent to Toulouse bishop Epiphanius of Pavia, who previously had brokered a truce between **Anthemius** and Ricimer. Epiphanius' biographer Ennodius reported that Epiphanius returned "with the bond of peace having been undertaken" (Vita Epiphanii 91). But, apparently the job was not yet done. For in 475 Nepos dispatched to Toulouse a delegation of four bishops from southern Gaul: Leontius of Arles, Faustus of Riez, Graecus of Marseilles, and Basilius of Aix. It may have been their job to work out the actual terms of the treaty.

One individual who was very concerned in the progress of these negotiations was Sidonius Apollinaris, now the bishop of Clermont and one of the leaders of the Arvernian resistance against the Goths. In a letter to Graecus of Marseilles, Sidonius gave his impression of the four bishops' authority: "Through you delegations come and go; to you, first of all, in the absence of the emperor, peace is not only reported when it has been negotiated, it is even entrusted to be negotiated" (Epist. 7.7.4). Subsequently, Sidonius was shocked to learn that the episcopal embassy had ceded the Auvergne to the Goths in exchange for a Gothic withdrawal from Provence.

Jordanes provides a rather confused account of the denouement of Nepos' Gallic maneuvering:

"Therefore, Ecdicius, having fought the Visigoths for a while and being unable to triumph, and having abandoned his homeland and in particular the city of Clermont to the enemy, betook himself to safer places. Hearing this, the emperor Nepos ordered Ecdicius to leave Gaul and to come to him, having made Orestes Master of Soldiers in his place... ("*Ergo... Ecdicius, diu certans cum Vesegothis nec valens antestare, relicta patria maximeque urbem Arvernate hosti ad tutiora se loca collegit. quod audiens Nepus imperator praecepit Ecdicium relictis Galliis ad se venire loco eius Orestem mag. mil. ordinatum...*": Getica 240-241).

Even though Jordanes appears to blame Ecdicius for the loss of the Auvergne, it is clear that its surrender was part of Nepos' own policy. And it remains to be seen why Ecdicius, a Gaul, would have been "recalled" to Italy if he had in fact been superseded anyway.

Elsewhere, meanwhile, Nepos was faced with renewed Vandal piratical attacks, and likewise attempted to negotiate a settlement. But, operating from a position of total weakness, he could do little more than to recognize Vandal possession of all the territories they occupied in Africa, Sicily, Sardinia, Corsica, and the Balearics.

## EXPULSION

Nepos' new Patrician, Orestes (whose main claim to fame was that he had served as a notarius, or secretary, of Attila the Hun), soon turned against him. Jordanes continues:

"This Orestes, having taken charge of the army and having departed from Rome against the enemies, arrived at Ravenna, and remaining there he made his son Augustulus emperor. When he learned this, Nepos fled to Dalmatia, and, deprived of his rule, he languished there as a private person, where the emperor Glycerius recently had obtained the see of Salona ("*qui Orestes suscepto exercitu et contra hostes egrediens a Roma Ravenna pervenit ibique remoratus Augustulum filimum suum imperatorem efficit. quo conperto Nepus fugit Dalmatias ibique defecit privatus a regno, ubi iam Glycerius dudum imperator episcopatum Salonitanus habebat*": Jordanes, Getica 241).

The Anonymous Valesianus suggests that the "enemy" sought by Orestes was none other than Nepos hlmself: "Soon Nepos arrived at Ravenna, pursued by the Patrician Orestes and his army. Fearing the arrival of Orestes, Nepos boarded a ship and fled to Salona" ("*mox veniens Ravennam, quem persequens Orestes patricius cum exercitu, metuens Nepos adventum Orestis, ascendens navem fugam petit ad Salonam*": 7.36 *s.a.*474). The Auctuarii Hauniensis ordo prior adds a few twists of its own:

"While Nepos was in the city, the Patrician Orestes was sent against him with the main force of the army. But because Nepos dared not undertake the business of resisting in such desperate conditions, he fled to Dalmatia in his ships. When Nepos had fled Italy and departed from the city, Orestes assumed the primacy and all the authority for himself and made his son Augustulus emperor at Ravenna" ("N*epote apud urbem residente Orestes patricius cum robore exercitus contra eum mittitur. sed cum desperatae rei negotium resistendo sumere non auderet, ad Dalmatias navigiis fugit. cum Nepos fugiens Italiam ac urbem reliquisset, Orestes primatum omnemque sibi vindicans dignitatem Augustulum filium suum apud Ravennam positum imperatorem facit, ipse vero omnem curam externorum praesidiorum gerit*": *s.a.*475; *cf.* Auctarii Hauniensis ordo posterior: "*Nepos cum ab Oreste patricio cum exercitu persequeretur, fugiens ad Dalmatias usque navigavit*": *s.a.*475).

If one accepts that in this passage the term "*urbs*" refers to Ravenna, and not, as is usually the case, to Rome, then it would seem once again that Nepos took refuge in Ravenna when faced by Orestes' revolt.

Other, briefer, sources provide a little clarification. The Fasti vindobonenses priores, for example, confirm that Nepos took flight from Ravenna after the arrival of Orestes: "In this year, on 28 August, the Patrician Orestes entered Ravenna with his army and the emperor Nepos fled to Dalmatia" ("h*is cons. introivit Ravennam patricius Orestes cum exercitu et fugavit imp. Nepos ad Dalmatias V kl. Septemb.*": no.615, *s.a.*475). Jordanes says simply, "In the western empire, Orestes put the emperor Nepos to flight and established his own son Augustulus on the throne" ("*parte vero Hesperia Nepotem imperatorem Orestes fugatum Augustulum suum filium in imperium conlocavit*": Jordanes, Romana 344); and Count Marcellinus likewise recalled, "As soon as Nepos had been put to flight, Orestes set his son Augustulus on the throne" ("*Nepote Orestes protinus effugato Augustulum filium suum in imperium conlocavit*": Chron. s.a.475).

These accounts, taken together, raise more questions than they answer. Why did Nepos replace Ecdicius with Orestes, when the first move of the latter was to seize Ravenna and raise a pretender to the throne? Who were the "enemies" against whom Orestes was being sent (Jordanes)? Who "sent" Orestes against Nepos (Auctuarium Hauniensis)? In default of additional information, one can only speculate. One possible reconstruction might be that the Senate of Rome was up to its old tricks and, as in the days of **Avitus** (455-456), became involved in an insurrection against a foreign emperor. Like **Avitus**, Nepos retreated north and occupied Ravenna. He recalled Ecdicius from Gaul not in disgrace, but as support against a domestic rival, just as **Anthemius** had summoned Bilimer against Ricimer. After the loss of Ravenna, Nepos then fled the country, just as **Avitus** had done. Ecdicius, meanwhile, simply disappeared from history.

## RULE IN DALMATIA

In September, 476, **Romulus Augustulus** was forced into retirement by the barbarian general Odovacar. **Romulus'** last official act was to forward a "letter of resignation" to the eastern emperor **Zeno**. At the same time, **Zeno** also received a letter from Nepos requesting his assistance, as reported by the Byzantine historian Malchus:

"When Augustus, the son of Orestes, heard that Zeno, having expelled Basiliscus, had again gained the kingship of the east, he caused the Senate to send an embassy to tell Zeno that they had no need of a separate empire but that a single common emperor would be sufficient for both territories, and, moreover, that Odovacar had been chosen by them as a suitable man to safeguard their affairs, since he had political understanding along with military skill; they asked Zeno to award Odovacar the patrician honor and grant him the government of the Italies. The men from the Senate in Rome reached Byzantium carrying these messages. On the same day messengers from Nepos also came to congratulate Zeno in the recent events concerning this restoration, and at the same time to ask him zealously to help Nepos, a man who had suffered equal misfortunes, in the recovery of his empire. They asked that he grant money and an army for this purpose and that he co-operate in his restoration in any other ways that might be necessary. Nepos had sent the men to say these things. Zeno gave the following answer to those arrivals and to the men from the Senate: the western Romans had received two men from the eastern Empire and had driven one out, Nepos, and killed the other, Anthemius. Now, he said, they knew what ought to be done. While their emperor was still alive, they should hold no other thought than to receive him back on his return. To the barbarians he replied that it would be well if Odovacar were to receive the patrician rank from the emperor Nepos and that he himself would grant it unless Nepos granted it first. He commended him in that he had displayed this initial instance of guarding good order, suitable to the Romans, and trusted for this reason that, if he truly wished to act with justice, he would quickly receive back the emperor [sc. Nepos] who had given him his positon of honor. He sent a royal epistle about what he desired to Odovacar and in this letter named him a patrician. Zeno gave this help to Nepos, pitying his sufferings because of his own, and holding to the principle that the common lot of fortune is to grieve with the unfortunate. At the same time Verina also joined in urging this, giving a helping hand to the wife of Nepos, her relative" (*fr.* 10: Gordon trans., pp.127-128).

This account again attests to the behind-the-scenes activities of the Senate of Rome, which, having instigated the exile of one emperor and the retirement of another, now was working hand-in-glove with Odovacar to keep imperial oversight at a safe distance.

In 477, Zeno also received an embassy from Gaul: "After the overthrow of Nepos, emperor of Rome, and expulsion of Augustulus, Odovacar became master of Italy and of Rome itself. When the western Gauls rebelled against him, they and Odovacar both sent embassies to **Zeno**, but **Zeno** inclined rather toward Odovacar" (Candidus *fr.*1: Gordon trans., p.128). It is difficult to see what the Gauls could have based their appeal on if not a restoration of Nepos. **Zeno** was placed in the position of having to refuse, for to take their side would have meant war with Odovacar, a step he clearly was unprepared to take.

In Dalmatia, Nepos maintained his claim to the western throne. He even may have issued solidi and tremisses at Salona ca.475/477, and it has been suggested that after **Romulus'** abdication Odovacar provided him with a token pension. Odovacar also seems to have found it convenient to continue to "recognize" Nepos, at least on the coinage, for during the period 477-480 gold tremisses continued to be issued at Milan and Ravenna in the names of both Nepos and **Zeno**. This would have allowed the Italian government to provide for its own coinage needs without further offending any of the claimants to the imperial throne.

## DEATH

Nepos' death was only briefly noted in sources that could not even agree on its date. The Auctarii Hauniensis ordo prior recorded under the year 480, "The emperor Nepos, while he was ruling in Dalmatia and was attempting to grasp the sceptre of his assumed honor, was killed on 22 June by his own supporters, pierced by unexpected blows" ("*Nepos imperator cum Dalmatis imperaret et sumpti honoris sceptra firmare conaretur, a suis improvisis ictibus confossus interiit X k. Iul.*"). The Auctarii Hauniensis ordo posterior dates the same event to 25 April ("*Nepos imperator cum in Dalmatiis imperii sui sceptra firmare conaretur, a suis occiditur VII k. Mai*"). The Fasti vindobonenses priores offer yet another date: "In this year the emperor Nepos was killed on 9 May" ("*"his cons. occiditur Nepos imp. VII idus Maias*": no.626, *s.a*.480). And the Anonymus Valesianus merely notes, "And he remained there for five years; afterwards he was killed by his own supporters" ("*et ibi mansit per annos quinque, postea vero a suis occidi*": 7.326). These varying dates may reflect the times the news was received in different places; if so, then the earliest of them, 25 April, might be most nearly correct.

If these sources can be believed, in 480 Nepos was in the process of making an attempt to recover the western throne in fact as well as in name. If so, his Dalmatian supporters would have none of it, and he fell victim to local intrigues. The Byzantine chronicler offers an ironic twist by suggesting (*apud*. Photius 78) that **Glycerius** himself was involved in the conspiracy to murder Nepos.

Odovacar then took advantage of Nepos' demise, and extended his own authority into Dalmatia. Cassiodorus recalled, "At this time, Odovacar overcame and killed Odiva in Dalmatia" ("*His conss. Odovacar in Dalmatiis Odivam vincit et perimit*": Chron. 1309, s.a.481). And the Auctarii Hauniensis ordo prior was a bit more specific: "King Odovacar departed for Dalmatia. When Ovida resisted him with an army, he was overcome by Odovacar and killed on 9 December. Once Ovida had been defeated and killed, Odovacar extended his kingdom far and wide by battles and conquest" ("*Odoachar rex in Dalmatiis proficiscitur, cui cum obsistere cum exercitu Ovida conaretur, ab Odoachre oppressus interiit V id. Decemb. Odoachar devicto Ovida atque interfecto regnum late proeliis et ferro extendit*": s.a.482).

## EPILOGUE

Nepos continued to bear the imperial title until the very end, and rightly deserves the title "last western Roman emperor." But by the time of his death he had become an unwanted anachronism, an embarrassment to **Zeno**, who could not afford to support him, and an obstacle to Odovacar, who had plans of his own for expansion in Dalmatia. His death, which brought to an end the long and distinguished line of western Roman emperors, passed with scarcely an acknowledgement.

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